Chapter 96 (Arc 2 Chapter 50) Aftermath

I numbly changed into clean clothes before I left the arena.  I searched, but I was not able to connect with Gareth or find Callem as I moved into the upper Citadel.  Men and women in Navy uniforms directed me to wait in a side ballroom.  There were a number of servants here, and I guessed since I had used my *cleanliness* spell and stored all my weapons, they considered me a non-combatant.  I was exhausted and spent magically.

I went to an open space on the far wall and slid down to a seated position.  I set some *alarm* spells to wake me before I went into a meditative state to recover my aether slightly faster.  I could go and help with the rest of the fighting once I had more aether.  My meditation drifted, and I fell asleep.

My dreams were of Aelyn leaving me over and over again.  Her face had different features each time her mother put her hand on her shoulder to activate the teleportation runes.  Sometimes it was, as I remembered, shock and apologetic.  Other times it contained mirth and disgust.

I was awoken by my alarm as an older man dressed in Miaden servant garb came to wake me.

“Young sir.  Young sir, the Navy is moving us.  I think the fighting has been contained or is over,” he said softly.  I stood and exited the room with him and checked my internal clock.  I had been asleep for just over two hours and recovered a little over 10% of my aether.  I didn’t feel refreshed as I walked with the group into the hallway.  I stepped next to a young naval officer to talk.

“Is the fighting over?” I asked quietly.

The officer nodded slowly, “Yes.  The remaining Miaden and Torrents are organizing the remnants of their families.”

I walked a little further and asked with hope, “Did Tessa Torrent survive?”

“I don’t know.  The only person I know who is alive is Loriel Miaden.  She organized the defense of the Citadel and commanded the loyal Blackguard,” the guard said plainly.

Of course, Loriel came out of this mess unscathed and in charge.  I tried to find out about Callem from the guard, “Do you know where Callem Dregella is?”

“Commander Callem Dregella was securing the skyship docks the last I heard,”  the officer said with admiration in his voice.  I guessed that he would not wait to join the fighting once he was back on his feet.

“Can you bring me to him?  I am one of his students,” I requested of the officer.   He looked me over and then told the others he was going to bring me the docks.  The walk through the halls showed many dead, Wolfguard and humans in the hallway.  The metallic scent of blood hung in the air while dry and congealing blood coated the walls and floors. There were a few signs of magic used; bloated corpses, burns on the walls, charred wall hangings, and the smell of ozone.  I was mildly sick seeing all the dead children.  This was what the Bricios had planned.

The officer wasn’t talkative, but I saw Callem directing men to search the skyships moored at the docks.  A number of men and women were already in chains.  Almost all of them were wearing the Bricio colors.  Callem was standing tall and in his element.  Instead of being contemplative and thoughtful, he gave orders and listened to brief reports.  He noticed me and walked quickly toward me, “Storme did Gareth find you?  Gareth and Bleiz went to search for you an hour ago.”

A bit embarrassed since I had taken a nap, I flushed, “No, Aelyn went to find her mother, and I followed.”  I didn’t want to lie to Callem, but I did with my next words, “We found her, and they fled into the city.  They plan to sneak to the lowlands.”

Callem pursed his lips, “That will be difficult.  They are searching for the Bricios and their servants at all departing ships.”  He heaved a deep breath, “If the possibility arises, I will ensure they gain their freedom.  Things are hectic, Storme.  The defenses for the islands have been compromised,” I flinched slightly. “There are very few Miaden and Torrent succession seats remaining.”  His face twisted, “I am sorry, Storme, Tessa did not make it.”  My heart lurched, and a knot blocked my throat.  I could not swallow or talk.

Callem put his hand reassuringly on my shoulder, “Lots of things are changing, Storme.”  He paused, “Skyholme needs you.  Take time to grieve but gather yourself.”  I knew Gareth talked to Callem and probably told him about my infatuation with Tessa.

Callem said, “I need to find Sebastian.  I need to sort out the academies.  We need *ships* and crews to fortify the defenses of the islands.”  Callem had stressed the word ships in his statement when looking at me.  He knew about my abilities and my aptitude for artificing. I guessed he wanted me to help Sebastian get more ships completed.  Things were happening too fast.  I was given a Naval Cadet jacket so I could walk freely in the Citadel.  I went to find my friend.

It took an hour to find Gareth.  He was in one of the many kitchens eating with Bleiz, “Couldn’t find me, so gave up and decided to fill your stomach?”  I said jokingly, even though I did not feel cheerful.

They were both covered in blood and gore.  Gareth smiled brightly, “Stormy, we were waiting here, hoping you would find us!  We need a good cook to fill our bellies!”  He came and hugged me, ruining my clothes.  It looked like Bleiz and Gareth had bonded in combat by their demeanor.  I looked at the ingredients available reflexively.  A large roast could be thinly sliced…a quick au jus sauce…some dough that had already risen and just needed baking.

“Ok, I will make us some sandwiches, and you can tell me what happened,” I said to Gareth’s delight.

Gareth was a great storyteller.  When they entered the main battle deep within the Citadel, they flanked the faux Wolfguard.  They fought to join the defenders and slowly thinned the attackers.  According to Gareth’s retelling, Bleiz had done his job and saved Gareth’s life no less than three times.  After they mopped up the last of the Wolfguard, things were tense as the Blackguard were all held in suspicion.  Nearly twenty Blackguard had been the ones who had turned on their comrades to let the usurpers in. The traitors even eliminated the few combat mages among the Blackguard.  It forced the *Absolution*, the Blackguard skyship, to land and join the fight.

The Bricios had attacked the Torrent wing of the Citadel first. They first used their large contingent of mages and Wolguard to overwhelm the Torrents. The battle was fierce, but the Bricios succeeded in breaching the defenses and slaughtering the Torrents, who had decided to seek refuge in the Citadel. Tessa was among their number. Gareth and Bleiz had searched for me there, thinking I would look for Tessa. I felt a knot of pain return but pushed it down. The Torrents had fought hard and used up a lot of the Bricio mage’s aether. The fatigued mages allowed the Navy to roll up the rear of the formation that was trying to breach the Miaden residences in the Citadel.

The ending was a forgone conclusion once the Bricio mages had been dealt with. It was bloody but became a conventional battle in which Gareth and Bleiz thrived. Callem even arrived and was masterful in directing soldiers and dealing with troublesome opponents. The Bricios had almost succeeded because they had invested most of their families’ Wolfguard with the support of the faux Wolfguard to attack the Citadel.  That explained why we had not encountered more resistance in the Black Spire, where we found Otieno.

The bread was done baking, and I sliced it not waiting for it to cool, spread a thin layer of butter, and piled the thinly sliced roast beef in the sauce. The excess au jus sauced was for dipping, and they dug in. I didn’t have an appetite. I used my *cleanliness* spell on myself and then on both of them.

“Stormy! You evolved the spell to clean others?” Gareth said, looking himself over. The spell could clean clothes but still needed one evolution to clean another person’s skin. I was a little shocked by Gareth’s not being affected by all the death and killing. I guess I was also a little numb to it—but Gareth seemed to be almost acting normal.

I retorted without enthusiasm, “Almost, but I still can not get rid of your foul-smelling feet.”

Gareth mocked being wounded by my comment. Bleiz chuckled but nodded at my assertion. We ate for a while in silence. A few soldiers came and checked on us but, realizing we were on their side, left us alone.

I finally asked, “So, Gareth, are you going to join the Navy now?” I figured since they had roped Callem back in, Gareth would follow his mentor.

“Demons, no!” Gareth burst out, “Being told what to do, where to go, when to go. Not for me. Besides, who is going to watch your back?” He beamed at me. I looked at Bleiz, who was on his fifth sandwich, trying to replenish his energy.

Bleiz talked with his mouthful, “You know I am with you.” Bleiz’s statement was not said with any malice. He asked, “Where is the elf girl?”

That was another dagger. “She left. We found her mother, and they left,” I stated flatly.

Gareth’s eyes went wide, “Aelyn left? I don’t believe it. She…” He started to say but stopped, reading my expression.

A few hours later, the three of us were sent back to Hen’s Hollow by Callem. He was staying in the capital, and I didn’t expect him to return. Hen’s Hollow felt displaced—out of synch with what had just happened. The townsfolk went about their business, blissfully unaware of the massive battle fought in the capital. When the new term started a few days later, Callem returned to talk privately with Gareth and me.

“The Triumvirate is broken,” he started by stating the obvious. “Loriel Miaden had been elected to lead the new Triumvirate. It will have one Miaden, one Torrent, and one elected representative from the people.” I wondered if Loriel had orchestrated this entire thing to take over Skyholme.

“Who will take the other two seats?” I asked after processing.

Callem spoke, “Arundel Torrent, Pomare’s son. Only six of the ascension seats for the Torrents survived the attack. Those seats voted him in. The third seat, the seat of the citizens, will be voted on at the New Year.” Callem got serious, “Storme, I talked with Sebastian, and I was hoping you would help with new Harbingers. Sebastian has resumed his Admiral role and is now in charge of the fleet. Not just the dockyards, but the entire fleet. Whenever I talk to him, he complains like a toddler, but he loves it. After completing the six remaining Harbingers, he plans to build thirty Wasps.”

My look of uncertainty had Callem continue, “Aldon told me you could do in a day what the master artificers would take a week to do. You can help those ships get to the skies the quickest. What I am about to tell you can not be repeated. The Bricios destroyed the anti-scrying and teleportation protections.” I contained my inner panic. “We lost five Harbingers in the failed coup attempt. Two were destroyed and the Bricios took three with them. After the Sadains and this,” he paused, “We are wide open to an attack.”

“I don’t know, Callem,” I started to say.

Callem stopped me, “I had given up on Skyholme, Storme. I was powerless to do anything and discarded by power-hungry rulers. Now,” he made intense eye contact with me, “I can make a difference. We can make a difference. Good people are in charge.” I still had major reservations about Loriel Miaden but did not voice them.

Callem let me consider his request. I didn’t want knowledge of my abilities to be widely spread. I was sure if I asked Sebastian, he would do his best to conceal my abilities. My family was all in Aegis City, currently safe. They had never had a chance to flee to the lowlands. I had explained all the coins and weapons I had given them as being Callem’s. Wynna was currently in possession of my property.

I delayed answering, “What of the Wolfguard and the Blackguard?” I asked.

Callem nodded and explained, “The unbonded will be continued to be trained. They will be given the freedom to choose their bond. The wolfkin woman will be freed and allowed to return to the lowlands after rebuilding the Navy. Loriel does not want to show weakness until we can defend ourselves. She also hopes the wolfkin of the lowlands will break their pact with the Sadians after their kin are returned to them.”

Callem shifted in his seat, “The Blackguard is decimated. Only six hundred remain. The traitors were found to be spelled by the Bricios, but still, there is a trust issue. It has been decided the remaining Blackguard will man the Wasp skyships as they are built. I am training them now to man a skyship. Loriel has plans to set up a Blackguard community on Stonefell Island with a new Naval port for twenty of the Wasp skyships. Once established, they will patrol the perimeter of the islands.”

“And the Wolfguard assigned to the Triumvirate families,” I prompted, thinking about Bleiz.

Callem nodded slowly, “They will remain as such. Only thirty-six Torrent Wolfguards and sixty-eight Miaden Wolfguards survived. The Bricios Wolfguards were all put to death.”

It really was going to be a new era for Skyholme. Seventy percent of the Wolfguard had been killed, and no more would be added. I made my decision, “I will help Sebastian every seventh day Callem,” he failed to contain a grin on his aged face.

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The third term was fairly subdued as the new political system took hold of Skyholme. Loriel was a good leader. She was trying to reignite a sense of nationalistic pride in the people. Callem directed the recruiting efforts and got many retired officers to return to duty. The times I traveled to the dockyards in the capital, Callem usually met me and told me of his progress. I refused invitations from Loriel every time I visited the capital. Usually, she sent Bylura as the messenger since we had a good relationship. I did not want to be involved in any politics that involved Loriel, though. Thankfully Gareth followed my lead and cut communication with Loriel as well.

Since Callem was allowed to sit in on many of the discussions of the Triumvirate, I learned the big decisions being debated. The largest was whether to open Skyholme to free trade. Loriel was a merchant by nature, and she had the idea of making Skyholme an open and safe trade port. Unsurprisingly there was resistance and fear of enemies infiltrating the islands. Her argument was the cities and kingdoms of the lowlands dealt with this effectively, and Skyholme could do the same. She argued what was holding Skyholme back from becoming more powerful was the resources from the older, resource-rich dungeons in the lowlands.

Another part of her master plan was to enter peace talks with the Sadians. This was an even more contentious topic. Centuries of war had soured the relationship. It would take more than a few diplomatic missions to heal. Callem, however, agreed that ending the threat of the Sadians through diplomacy was the best course of action. The Skyholme Islands spent half of their orbit over the Sadian Empire. It needed to be done.

Working with Sebastian was probably the best decision I had made. When I did my runecraft, he made sure we were alone. I got the runes inscribed for all the Harbinger ships and learned a lot from Sebastian. He was quick to point out mistakes and have me correct them. My created metals were in high demand for the artificing, and Sebastian quickly cooked the books to hide where the metals were coming from. In exchange for pure platinum, I was ‘sold’ materials to build my skyship.

My skyship was slowly being constructed by Rippon and Remy and two laborers they had hired. Although a Bricio, Isla was spared from the cleansing due to her relations with Loriel. She had taken over Loriel’s apartment at the *Shiny Platinum* and was practicing her architecture craft while assisting with obtaining materials for the skyship. Rippon was trying to make the ship, the *Maelstrom*, his masterpiece.

My spellcraft had also advanced from the fight and over the third term. Most of my spare aether went to creating platinum for Sebastian. Only Callem knew I could create mithril, and I asked him to keep it a secret. The chains I took from the portal room had more than enough mithril to enchant my skyship. I did copy all the runes on the chains before destroying them. Many of the runes were unfamiliar to me. I self-rationalized that I had done Skyholme a favor in taking the chains and forcing the people out of isolationism. It was an ethical leap, and many times I considered returning the chains, but eventually, I destroyed them.

My *cleanliness* spell had reached level 24, and at level 23, I extended the range with the evolution to ten feet, allowing me to clean another person as I cleaned myself. At level 23, a spell also took a quantitative leap forward in its strength. This was an awareness of the spell I had not experienced before. I could now more precisely choose what I wanted to be cleaned. I was effectively editing the effects applied in detail. For instance, I could now choose to clean specific areas, which I used to effect by writing ‘Clean Me’ in dirty locations in the barracks. The joke quickly went flat with the other students.

*Mend flesh* reached level seventeen, and I evolved the spell to speed cast it so I could utilize it while I was using the *lightning reflexes* spell. *Obfuscate abilities* reached level 13, and the two evolutions were both editing abilities on what people could read about me.

My *dimensional closet* made it to level 19. At level 17, the evolution increased the height by two feet. My core was still growing, but I did install the wooden platform with stairs built by Rippon. It allowed me to set up the bedroom furniture Wynna bought me on the second level, greatly opening up the space. At level 19, I evolved the spell to anchor it to an object in the world. Now I could enter the closet and close it behind me. When I exited, I was no longer in danger of appearing in the open air as the islands moved away while I spent time in the closet.

My *lightning reflexes* had passed level 23 during the fighting. This was probably why I fought so effectively in the Black Spire. Both evolutions enhanced my speed, so even without overdrive, I was now 97% faster than normal, twice as fast as a normal fighter. The level 23 added enhancement greatly stabilized the spell for me. I barely needed to heal my ligaments and tendons when I used the overdrive of the spell.

With overdrive, I was three times faster than normal, and my reflexes and speed had already been at a peak for a normal human. Gareth was actually not upset and thrived on training against me when I used the spell. He could actually still beat me when I was just at 97% enhanced speed. That irked me. When I used overdrive, I beat him about 90% of the time. His ability to challenge me at that speed made it clear he was special.

My *alarm* spell advanced to level 20, and I used the evolution to protect my hearing from the spell. That way, I could use the flash-bang effect in close quarters and not be affected by the sound or flash. The *privacy* spell reached level 16 and did not have any evolutions. *The arcane lock* spell reached level 10, and at level 7, I increased the complexity of my lock, making it harder for other mages to unravel.

*Aether shield* also had no evolutions but had reached level 16 and was on the cusp of an evolution. *Lesser restoration* made it to level 12; at level 11, I evolved the spell to regrow flesh. This extended to organs that were not completely destroyed as well. I could not regrow bones or limbs, but given a few more evolutions, I would be able to achieve this feat if I invested enough aether in the healing.

My lightning spear reached level eight, and both evolutions I achieved focused on improving the bolt’s accuracy. I figured the spell was no good to me if I couldn’t hit what I was aiming at. With the evolutions, I was accurate out to forty feet now.

I also added three new spells to my aether spell matrix. *Aether fortress* was added first so I could return the spellbook to Selina before she departed to teach in the mage academy in the capital. This spell was a permanent construct on my aether core and helped me defend against my aether being drained or contained. The bracers that had contained Aelyn’s mother now barely worked on me. I used the bracers to help level the spell up to level 5, with each evolution focused on strengthening my defenses.

My second new spell was the *ice ball* spell we looted from the dungeon. It started as a baseball-sized orb. My first evolution was to compress the ball down to a golf ball-sized orb. This made a great, long-lasting ice cube for a drink but also a deadly projectile. It had almost the same density as gold. In the second and third evolutions, I increased the speed of the ball to 300 mph. This was fast enough to break bones. For the fourth evolution, I increased my accuracy with the sphere. I added speed casting to the seventh evolution so I could use it while using my *lightning reflexes* spell. It was a good mid-range attack if I didn’t want to use the flash of *lightning spear*. Truthfully I just liked it for the overpowered ice cube. It kept a drink cold for hours and fizzed as it slowly melted.

The last new spell I learned before the New Year was the tier 2 lightning spell *lightning sphere*. My first evolution was just increasing the shock value. The spell was a ball of lightning spread out in a five-foot radius on impact. The damage was minimal, but it did disrupt the nerves, making it hard for the affected people to move. I wanted to get to the dungeon to level up this spell but never had the opportunity.

My spell matrix was also filling up as I had 25 of 33 slots now filled. I wanted to purchase a new tier-four spell next. Something with great utility. A tier four spell outside my affinities would cost eight slots to imprint. It would not be the last spell I would be imprinting as I would be able to increase my spell matrix to as high as 110 in the future.

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The week before the end of the term, I was working with Sebastian as he was detailing the differences in the runes between the Harbinger and Wasps. Bylura entered, and I was ready to tell her I did not want to meet Loriel again for the tenth time. Instead, Loriel entered with two Wolfguard behind her.

“Storme, maybe you will talk with me now?” She located a chair in the cluttered office and sat down uninvited. “Now that I am here, maybe we can have a discussion about the Heart Stone?”

I hid my surprise and panic in my response, “Heart Stone? What about it?”

She smiled knowingly. Loriel looked much older than her years after ruling Skyholme for just 12 weeks. “I know Aelyn took the stone, and you took the runic chains. We cast a *flashback* divination spell to see what had occurred. I am surprised as I was certain it was the sabotage of the Bricios, and that is what everyone thinks.”

Sebastian was tense next to me as Loriel had just called me a traitor. She smiled ruefully, “Do not worry, Storme. I am not going to reveal the secret. What you have done here,” she waved her hands, indicating the dockyards, “Has made up for what you have taken. The removal of the Heart Stone actually helped force some policies to fruition, and Skyholme is better for it.”

I relaxed slightly, “What do you want then?”

Her smile chilled me slightly, “I know your skyship will be completed in a few weeks. I hoped you could take an envoy to the Sadian kingdom to negotiate peace. Unfortunately, Arundel Torrent is highly resistant to opening peace talks. He feels we are still too vulnerable to takethis step at this time. Therefore I am opening a back channel.” I knew it was not a request. Loriel was devious enough to switch to threats if I did not accommodate her.

“Why me? There have to be a dozen other skyships that can accomplish this?” I argued.

“No one as unaffiliated as you are,” she smiled thinly. “Consider this penance, repayment, or just an adventure. I do not care. I need this done, and you are the best candidate. Cilia and Leda have volunteered to crew your skyship. They are a good pilot and navigator team.”

I considered my options. I was to start the dungeon academy in Aegis City in four weeks. The skyship would be done in three. Going to the Sadian capital city of Goldreach was risky, but Loriel pointed out that I was unaffiliated and my skyship was unique. “Fine, I will go.” I did not plan to be her pawn, though. I had my own plans.